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Unapproachable Evanston

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Unapproachable Evanston

Stephen Benz (bio)

Evanston, Wyoming: yet another place that calls to mind Emerson's somewhat inscrutable line about an "unapproachable America." Back in Nebraska, I had learned about a "bed-and-breakfast" hotel in Evanston, a

“real nice place,” I was told, with nice folks running it. A bed-and-breakfast was not the kind of lodging I usually favored. Far from it. I was drifting across the country, camping in a tent, seeking out budget campgrounds—remote Bureau of Land Management sites with limited facilities and a nominal fee. I was “roughing it” on purpose—for a purpose, or so I wanted to believe. At any rate, I had no intention of staying in some posh bed-and-breakfast. No way.

Yet here I was, tooling the streets of Evanston in search of the “Bear River Country Inn.”

A talkative stranger had informed me about the place. This was at a truck stop diner outside Grand Island. By chance, we were seated side by side at the counter, sipping coffee, waiting on our food. The stranger tried chatting up the waitress as she busied herself at her station. Failing in getting much out of her, he turned to me. Wanted to know, was I a truck driver? Traveling salesman? Where was I going and why? Over the miles and after many such encounters, I had learned to keep my answers simple and—unlike my roundabout route—straight forward. Keep it minimal. Reveal as little as possible.

Heading west, I said. Just heading west.

He nodded knowingly. In America, “just heading west” says plenty. It’s all about a common rootlessness: dissatisfaction with the here and now, a need to move on, change the scene, find yourself. Call it an Emersonian quest. *Ghostlike we glide.*

The stranger mulled my words and nodded again. “I got you,” he said.

He wondered if by chance I’d be passing through Evanston, Wyoming. I couldn’t say for sure. Well, if I went through Evanston, he said, I should stop for the night at this place he knew, what they call a “B and B.” His cousin was the owner and operator. Nice folks, her and her husband. Good Christian people. They’d take care of me. The stranger produced a business card. “Here, take this,” he said, signing the back of it. Just tell them Cousin Dwight recommended me to the place, and if they had a

room available that night, they'd let me stay there free of charge.

I wasn't all that interested, but I took the card anyway. Sometimes it's easier just to go along, take what's offered. Being agreeable usually brings the conversation more quickly to a close. I stuck the card in the book I had **[End Page 131]** been reading: Kerouac's *Desolation Angels*, one of my guidebooks, along with Emerson and Thoreau, for my meander across the continent.

He cocked his head to see the title, and his brow furrowed slightly. "Tell you what," he said, "I got something else for you." From the chest pocket of his jeans jacket he produced a palm-sized New Testament, green-covered, a gift of the Gideon Society.

This, too, I accepted without protest.

"Atta boy," he said and slapped me on the shoulder as he slid off the stool. "Well, pardner, be seeing you somewhere down the road."

He ambled off to pay his check, chatting a while with the clerk as the transaction took place. With all the din and clatter in the coffee shop, I couldn't make out the conversation, but I could guess its drift. He took a toothpick from the dispenser and left the diner. Through the window, I watched him climb into a huge, gleaming pickup truck. I waited until he drove off and was out of sight before asking the waitress for my check.

"Your friend already paid it," she told me.

Weeks after the encounter with Cousin Dwight, I approached Evanston, Wyoming—a "Preserve America Community," a "Wyoming Main Street Community," and "Tree City USA," according to the welcome sign. A subsequent sign issued a warning or possibly a threat: "Keep our place clean ...you know..."

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